CHAPTER 6

Openly Gay Families and the Negotiation of Black Community and Religious Life

Black neighborhoods have always been a central location for gay African American social life. Nevertheless, prior to the 1980s, gay sexuality in racial minority communities was rarely shared or articulated openly in public settings, it was not recognized as part of the larger community narrative of discrimination and struggle, and gay Blacks tended not to openly create families together.[1] Recent social and political changes, however, including the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS among Black heterosexual women, Black political and religious leaders openly addressing issues related to gay sexuality, and amplified public debates about the legal status of same-sex marriage, have moved the enactment of same-sex desire from the private into the public sphere: relationships once hidden from family and community are gradually being exposed and celebrated publically as gay women and men openly form unions and raise families together. [2]

According to Census data, the majority of Black same-sex couples reside in cities, towns, and rural areas that are predominantly African American. They are more likely to live with other Blacks in minority communities than to live with White homosexuals in cities and neighborhoods with high percentages of same-sex couples (Dang and Frazer 2004; Gates unpublished analyses of the 2008 American Community Survey; National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 2004). While residents in racial minority neighborhoods have always been aware of the presence of lesbians and gay men in their families and social environs, the recent

more public visibility of lesbian- and gay-headed family life has made it difficult for Black heterosexual communities to avoid acknowledging the homosexuality of family members, neighbors, and acquaintances. However, the persistent sense of disapproval among Black heterosexuals of the open enactment of same-sex desire creates what Cohen (1999) calls a "cross-cutting issue" within the Black community. Cohen defines cross-cutting issues as concerns "rooted in or built on the often hidden differences, cleavages, or fault lines of marginal communities" and "perceived as being contained to identifiable subgroups in Black communities, especially those segments of Black communities which are the least empowered" (9). The cross-cutting issue that open Black gay sexuality poses in Black communities affects the lives of sexual minorities who also define themselves by their membership in the racial category "Black" and who are increasingly insisting that others in their communities recognize and respect the gay component of their identities.

Historians define a "modern gay identity" as one whose subject incorporates homosexual behavior into everyday experiences and encourages others to acknowledge this sexuality.[3] In this chapter I investigate the lives of gay Black women who have embraced a modern gay identity within Black communities, emphasizing the ways in which they manage the discomfort of their families and neighbors, and how well this identity status coheres with their spiritual selves. I first consider the experiences of Black lesbians as they move from viewing their homosexuality as a discrete part of their lives toward seeing it as something around which they have constructed an open self-identification. Many Black lesbians—particularly Caribbean and African women—encounter both familial and cultural resistance in this process. The women in this study learn to live with a degree of contradiction and ambiguity as they seek ways to maintain their family relationships and at the same time embrace an identity as gay women.

In the central section of the chapter I analyze the different ways Black lesbians forming families experience tolerance but not acceptance within the racial group, whose cultural norms they must negotiate. I use Goffman's (1963) analyses of stigma and covering to show the conditions under which those with stigmatized identities choose to reveal information about themselves to others. I argue that gay women have an easier time fitting into Black environments when they adhere to particular definitions of a middle-class politics of respectability and maintain their community connections through strong racial group solidarity. Everyone does not adhere to all of these conditions all of the time, however, and

the conflict and reconciliation that ensue are part of the progression forward toward acceptance.

Finally, I explore how the move from private to more public presentations of gay sexuality has affected the relationships Black lesbians have with their religious communities. African American religious institutions are not just locations of spiritual guidance; they also act as agents or conduits of Black culture through their involvement in and control over secular civic, political, and economic organizations and activities.[4] The historic sacred and secular participation of religious organizations in Black community life, combined with their general ideologies that do not support homosexuality, influence the rhetoric racial group members use to criticize homosexuality, such that even those with no strong religious faith or church involvement draw on religious teachings as the first line of critique against lesbian and gay identities (Cohen 1999; Moore 2010b). Most of the subjects in this study were raised with religious faiths that are disapproving and sometimes condemning of the open practice of homosexuality. Despite the homophobia in these institutions, however, the majority of the women I studied continue to maintain a belief in God, as well as affiliations with religious organizations. While the Black heterosexual community uses religion to constrain gay behavior through an often candid denouncement of homosexuality, some in the Black gay community use religion to validate their identities as same-gender-loving people. Finally, this chapter discusses ways Black gay women negotiate and manage a group affiliation and "insider" status around one self-understanding based on race when cross-cutting issues around the public enactment of homosexuality threaten to separate them from strong and positive affiliations with the racial group.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL: MOVING FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC EXPRESSIONS OF GAY SEXUALITY AND FAMILY FORMATION

One morning, I called Marisol Sampson, a petite, feminine, highly successful thirty-two-year-old Black Puerto Rican entrepreneur with huge brown eyes, dramatic braids that hang down her back, and a biting wit. Marisol's *abuelita* (grandmother), who played a pivotal role in raising her and her brother, had recently passed away at the age of ninety. Prior to her grandmother's death, she and Marisol would have dinner on Sunday evenings at the nursing home where her *abuelita* lived. Marisol told me it

was worth the extra money she spent out of pocket each month for her grandmother to live in the Jewish facility on the Upper East Side of Manhattan instead of the less expensive, lower-quality facility in East Harlem that Medicaid was willing to cover. The two were extremely close, and Marisol would use these visits to talk about various things, including her *abuelita*'s memories of their family's history, particularly the life of Marisol's mother, who passed away when Marisol was much younger.

I called Marisol to follow up on a conversation we had had many months earlier. At that time, Marisol mentioned that years after she had come out to her grandmother, she remembered a close relationship between her mother and her mother's friend and suspected that it might not have been platonic. The woman had lived for a time in her mother's house; she had also lived with her mother's sister Ruby. One evening, Marisol came right out and asked her grandmother, "Did my mother have relationships with women?" She was not prepared for her grandmother's matter-of-fact response: "Oh please—We all did!" When Marisol asked her to clarify, her grandmother told her, "You all seem to think that you women just started this whole thing, or that we don't know about such things. This has been going on for a long time. It was just not in the open like it is now." During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Marisol's mother, her mother's friend, and her Aunt Ruby had all "carried on" with a woman known as Hondura. Marisol's grandmother said that Hondura kept going back and forth in love relationships between her mother and her aunt, and it caused many an argument between the two of them.

They continued the conversation during a subsequent visit, and Marisol's grandmother told her about a relationship that she herself had during the late 1940s and early 1950s with someone she described as a "best, best kind of friend." She and the other woman were both married with children and living next door to each other. Marisol's grandmother said they were "inseparable," and while most people thought they were just best friends, people who "did that kind of thing" knew it was more than that. Eventually, her friend's husband moved her friend away. Marisol's grandmother believed the husband did this to separate the two of them because of their intense relationship. She said that back then, "Those types of relationships were not okay, and people did not discuss them," but many were aware that they existed.

The history of intimate relationships that Marisol's grandmother reports having occurred among several generations of women in their

family—and the different contexts in which these relationships were enacted—attests to the changing climates in which same-sex relationships among women have been understood and practiced. While we cannot know from her grandmother's utterances whether these relationships were of a sexual nature, we can tell from the context in which her grandmother introduced the relationships to Marisol that they were on a continuum with the type of openly lesbian relationship Marisol was involved in. Her grandmother had a "best, best kind of friend" in the 1950s while she was heterosexually married, and the intimacy of their relationship was not socially acceptable and not openly discussed. Marisol's mother "carried on" with a woman called Hondura and argued with her sister over this woman. Marisol's grandmother's description suggests that Marisol's mother and aunt had a series of relatively open same-sex liaisons that took place simultaneously with her mother's heterosexual marriage to Marisol's father.

In a different example, we have Dr. Marilyn Richards. Marilyn was born in 1942 and raised on Chicago's South Side. When she first began to act on her same-sex desires in the early 1960s she knew she would have to maintain a heterosexual façade. Unlike the previous generations of women in Marisol's family, however, Marilyn chose a different path. Marilyn had her first same-sex relationship with her best friend while living in Chicago after each had divorced their husbands and moved in together with their children. Because they had been previously married and were already known in the community to have a close friendship, they were able to keep private the romantic nature of their union. Their past histories as heterosexuals provided the cloak necessary to safely pursue a more intimate relationship, and Goffman (1963) would describe the experience of keeping this relationship hidden or invisible as "passing." Marilyn marks this relationship as her entry into a lesbian identity. She sees these early experiences as part of a gay sense of self she had, and that is what allows us to link her behavior to Goffman's definition of passing. Unlike Marisol's grandmother, who never used the terms *lesbian* or *gay* to describe the experiences in her life, Marilyn defines her sexual orientation as lesbian and labeled her first same-sex relationship a lesbian one. Moreover, Marilyn and her partner, unlike Marisol's grandmother, were divorced at the time of this relationship. They did not have to maintain the relationship in the context of one person's marriage to someone else. Instead, they were able to make the relationship between themselves the primary union.

In 1960s Chicago, Black lesbians met other lesbians and socialized at private parties at women's homes that one could only learn about by falling into particular networks of women. A gay cousin was Marilyn's primary gateway into this social scene; she describes this relative as "a real sort of way out weird woman, but someone that we liked." There were also a few neighborhood bars on the South Side of Chicago that catered to a Black lesbian and gay clientele, and Marilyn and her partner would go to these places and seek out friendships with young women who shared their interests. This lesbian community that Marilyn participated in during the 1960s was racially homogeneous: she lived in an African American neighborhood and joined a network of lesbians that was also predominantly Black. These social contexts were an important backdrop and foundational aspect of Black lesbian and gay identities.

Marilyn's relationship with her best friend ended in 1971 when they were both twenty-seven, and although she continued to have lesbian relationships, she never revealed the nature of this very special union to any other family or community member outside of the lesbian social group she and her partner had been a part of. Marilyn refers to her experiences in the social groups as "her secret life." Looking back on it, she concludes that one of the most positive aspects of her first gay relationship was that it was able to safely take place within her existing racial community. She was able to keep her gay relationship a secret and still participate with her partner in family life, albeit in a closeted way. She did not have to conceal her partner—only to hide the full nature of their relationship—and she says this provided her with an easier transition to a lesbian life than she might have had in other circumstances.

As Marilyn's and Marisol's remarks emphasize, there is nothing new about Black women having a lesbian sexuality: rather, it is same-sex couples openly living and raising children together in African American communities that is a distinct departure from past understandings of lesbian and gay behavior. In the past, lesbian/gay practice was overshadowed by public identities that emphasized racial group membership and deemphasized sexuality. Participation in the private social world of Black lesbian life was accompanied by a public presentation of self that was presumed to be heterosexual; many times, women remained in marriages or other visible heterosexual relationships while fulfilling their same-sex desires. The relationships they had with women were often unstable and of a short duration.

We can attribute the preference for invisible gay sexuality in Black communities to two forces: the primacy of racial identity over other

identification categories and the politics of respectability. Both of these concepts have been historically important to how people with same-sex desire chose to express that desire in heterosexual contexts. Cohen argues that Blackness as an identity status has historically been perceived to be a unifier, because as a group, African Americans share a history and current existence framed by opposition and marginalization (1999, 91). This was particularly the case during the 1960s and 1970s in the aftermath of the civil rights and Black Power movements. These movements occurred simultaneously with, and contributed to, increasing economic stratification in Black communities. In this period, members of the racial group were expected to prioritize their racial identity over other identification categories.

Black gay people sought to remain integrated into African American communities because these environments served as a buffer to the very real threat of racism and discrimination. The presence of a unifying racial identity meant they were willing to accept a "conditional membership" that required them to deemphasize or deny their gay sexuality. In return, they were able to rely on the racial community as a system of social support. Today, Black lesbians and gays are likely to express multiple identities. Yet the families of many gay Black people, especially their parents, would prefer to keep their sexuality under wraps.

Consider how Caroline Tate, a thirty-seven-year-old femme and "southern belle" born and raised in Florence, South Carolina, came out to her mother. She proudly told her: "Look at it this way, just to keep your sanity. At least I'm not shaving my head, I'm not wearing men's clothing. You can take me anywhere now, and no one would know that your daughter's a lesbian. So that should make you happy." Caroline explains: "I remember promising her I would never be that person, and she didn't have to worry about anything like that. And people wouldn't know that I'm gay unless we told them, because I'm not a dyke." Caroline meant to assuage what she perceived to be her mother's main concern about her daughter's gay identity: its visibility to others. She contrasted herself to a "dyke" in order to convey that even though she is gay, she would continue to conform to traditional expectations of a feminine gender presentation. Caroline's use of this language in coming out to her mother addressed the unspoken assumption that her mother would want to keep her daughter's gay sexuality invisible.

Later in our discussion, Caroline admitted that she had felt obligated to come out to her mother because her girlfriend at the time had a gender presentation that was very boyish and masculine, and her presence

in Caroline's life was causing rumors about her among her family members. Caroline surmised that had her partner been more feminine, she probably would not have openly acknowledged the nature of that relationship to her mother. Prior to being in this gay relationship, Caroline had only been with men, and she was raising a daughter from a former cohabiting union. She allowed and even encouraged her mother to use her past experiences with men to maintain a pretense with others that Caroline was heterosexual. Caroline knew that the relationship with her lover at that time would not last. She did not see herself as creating a family with her, and she had no desire for her relatives and close friends to accept this person as an integral part of her life. In this context, it did not matter to Caroline that her mother fully accept her gay sexuality.

Many of the women I spoke to described a period of time in their lives when their family members suspected they were engaged in same-sex relationships but they did not present their partners to family members as their mates. They may have brought these individuals to family gatherings or have even cohabited with them. Both partners and their kin, however, allowed for the nature of these same-sex relationships to remain unspoken. This "don't ask, don't tell" policy enabled the women to remain on good terms with family and old friends rather than cause a breach for a relationship their families did not want to fully acknowledge.

Respondents and other lesbians I met who were from countries in Africa and the Caribbean were particularly likely to take a don't ask, don't tell approach to their early lesbian relationships. They saw this strategy as necessary because of the way their families viewed the open practice of gay sexuality: they reported that their relatives expected same-sex desire to only be enacted in the private sphere of their personal lives. This expectation for how to engage in same-sex desire was consistent with the information I learned during the course of several conversations I had with an Afro-Caribbean woman about same-sex romantic expression among African women in Paris. In late spring of 2003 I happened to visit Paris, France, during the time of a music festival that enraptured the entire city. I actively sought out spaces that were inhabited by Blacks, and found a Creole restaurant the Blacks in Paris website said was Black-owned. The restaurant was located in le Marais, the gay district. There I met a woman from Martinique named Karen. I spoke very little French and she spoke very little English, so we communicated in Spanish, a language we were both conversant but not fluent in. I told Karen I wanted to learn more about the nightlife for Blacks in Paris, and

since we were in le Marais, I felt bold enough to ask if there were any places that were frequented by Black people who were gay. She told me that she was bisexual, that the two women who owned the restaurant we were in were longtime lovers, and she promised to take me to several parties that were going on that weekend, including one at the restaurant the next evening.

Karen was a gracious tour guide that weekend. I accompanied her to African restaurants, after hours night spots, as well as three different parties all organized by African Parisians. Some of these were clearly gay spaces and others were not. The largest of these parties took place on a Saturday night at a venue that had two levels. While women and men waited on line to enter the venue, once inside the men went upstairs and the women downstairs. The space for women was dark and cavernous, and women sat together in intimate groups talking, laughing, and drinking. Some of the pairs looked like they were on dates because they sat close to one another, sometimes with one person's arm around the other. They wore blouses and slacks or skirts, blue jeans and t-shirts, but I did not see any overtly masculine displays of gender in their clothing. They danced in pairs or small groups to different types of African and Afro-Caribbean music. Karen tried to explain the origins of the different sounds, but difficulties in translation kept me from fully understanding. What I could definitely understand, however, were the similarities between this party, the men's party, and the Black gay pride parties I had attended in the United States. When I went to take a peak upstairs, the men's party had more energy, the music was louder (but similar in style to the types of music played downstairs), and several men had taken off their shirts to reveal well-toned bodies. The men were also dancing in pairs with one another. There were a few White men at that event, while there were only Black women downstairs.

I asked Karen what lesbian relationships were like for African and Afro-Caribbean women in Paris, and she told me most women were married to or in relationships with men and that it was extremely rare to find two women living together openly as lesbians. She said there was no room for that sort of thing, and that their Afro-Caribbean cultures did not support or even understand what it would mean for two women to live together as a family. Sometimes their husbands or boyfriends had an inclination that their wives or girlfriends might be romantically involved with women, but so long as she continued to live out a heterosexual identity in her daily life, any same-sex liaisons were not usually openly acknowledged by her male partner. I found a version

of this expectation for how to practice same-sex desire in the stories Caribbean lesbians living in the U.S. shared about their parent's and other kin's response to their sexuality.

The don't ask, don't tell solution of ignoring an individual's lesbian practice becomes problematic in contexts in which people want to publicly declare an intimate partner as "family." When Nadine Burroughs, a thirty-eight-year-old obstetrics and gynecological nurse, divorced her husband and told her Jamaican-born mother that she would now only be dating women, she recalls her mother responding that her same-sex desire "was neither new nor interesting" and that plenty of people have "indulged in that sort of thing." The problem for Nadine's mother was not that her daughter was interested in intimacy with other women; rather, she thought it was absolutely shameful for her daughter to *reveal* her engagement in those types of relationships to the outside world. While she did not object to Nadine's having sexual relationships with women, she thought Nadine should do "what is proper" and "be respectable" and "marry well." For Nadine's mother, the problem was that her daughter's open expression of homosexuality through a wedding ceremony meant she could no longer present her daughter to others as heterosexual.

Many foreign-born lesbians and women whose parents were born outside of the United States tend to view the out, visible performance of gay identity as antithetical to the values of their own cultures. In 2001, Simone Augustine and Natalie DuBois, two second-generation Haitian women, decided to affirm their five-year partnership with a wedding in the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens. Despite the close relationships each had built with the other's family, both of their mothers expressed reservations about this public event. Would they invite relatives from Haiti to the ceremony, thus bringing shame on the family in an open celebration of their disgraceful behavior? Would they embarrass themselves and their families by asking the elder from the Seventh-Day Adventist church that Natalie was raised in to officiate? Natalie's mother was particularly outraged, disappointed, and disgusted by the prospect of a lesbian wedding. She told her daughter that she did not understand how she could be so "American" in her unrestricted proclamation of the relationship. Over and over, and in tears, she asked her in Haitian Creole, "*Kòman ou fë pote kalite wont sa-a nan fanmi-an? Poukisa ou oblige agi tankou Ameriken, epi fè tout moun wè bagay sa-a*?!" [How can you bring such shame on our family? Why would you behave like an American and bring this out for everyone to see?!] Natalie's mother felt

offended in part because her daughter's interest in having a lesbian wedding—even one between two Haitian people—was a sign of her assimilation into what she viewed as the negative aspects of American culture. Other foreign-born parents expressed similar sentiments about their children's "American" behavior in acknowledging their same-sex desire through something as public as a gay wedding.

The public expression of a modern gay identity through weddings or commitment ceremonies is also problematic because these types of celebrations imply the equality of gay and heterosexual unions. Shanice Benson, a Jamaican-born woman, said, "The whole idea of two women being in a relationship is really far-fetched" for her parents. While U.S. born Blacks certainly have family and racial group members who see the public expression of gay sexuality as an abomination, Blacks who were born and socialized outside of the United States particularly find there is very little room for same-sex desire and behavior in their conceptions of identity. Their ethnic identity calls for a public image of heterosexuality, and openly gay behavior is used to create boundaries between themselves and U.S. born and other Westernized groups.

Kinship and Community Ties: Learning to Live with Contradictions and Ambiguities

The move from unspoken gay sexuality to the public presentation of gay relationships and family formation forces parents and other relatives of lesbian women to acknowledge their daughters' lesbian practice more directly than they once would have. In prior generations, everyone at the dinner table may have been aware that an uncle was gay, but because he called his lover his "friend," never brought him to the family reunion, and never adopted his mate's child nor asked that the child call his own mother "Grandma," family members could reserve their negative opinions and speculation for private conversations outside of his presence. National public debates over the legalization of same-sex marriage and related issues, however, have brought the topic of gay sexuality more directly into homes and into the pulpits of community churches, creating the space for family members to be more up front in their feelings and opinions about a relative's same-sex desire.[5]

Some women have found that family members liken their sexuality to a problem behavior worse than drug addiction, adultery, or nonmarital childbearing. Thirty-seven-year-old Corey James says that Blacks will excuse negative behavior of all types but are quick to judge people

who are gay. She articulates the situation in the following way: "Uncle Brian might be a crackhead, but that don't even matter to them. What matters is that, 'Oh my goodness, Mary is gay!' You know what I'm saying? And I always tell people that you can be anything in a Black household but gay and come back home. I know it for a fact that you could have robbed your mother blind and come home to live, and she'll just be like, 'Oh, my baby got a problem.' But if you come out to your family and they're strong against that, there's no going home. They'll forgive you for robbing them blind. [If you're on drugs,] they'll say you was 'a little sick,' and they'll take you in the house over and over and over and over again, but not when you're gay."

Corey's comments reflect the weight of having lived through the 1980s and 1990s drug epidemics that ravaged urban communities like the ones she has lived in. She grew up in a low-income housing project in the Bronx, and although the grandmother who raised her was tolerant when she came out as gay, she experienced some difficulty with other relatives accepting her lesbian sexuality. Corey's comments also reflect years of experience counseling people at the LGBT nonprofit agencies where she has worked. There, she has met many people who were beaten or disowned by their parents and kin because they were open about their gay identities. Some of the harshest experiences of homophobia were felt by teenagers and transgendered people who were particularly economically vulnerable and in need of social services.

Forty-one-year-old Jackie Roberts says that older Black people are particularly hypocritical and self-righteous when it comes to their opinions about gay people: "They think, 'Oh, you're going to hell. You are going to burn.' Forget the fact that you've got ten illegitimate kids running around, [or] you're messing with this lady's husband. They've broken all of your 'Big Ten' [Ten Commandments], and guess what? There's nothing in the Big Ten that says 'Thou shall not be gay.' But that adultery piece? If I go [to Hell], you're going to be burning right next to me."

Jackie never explicitly came out to her grandmother, who had raised her from birth and was an important mother figure in her life, but she was certain that her sexuality had been known to the rest of her family for some time when Jackie's grandmother found her in pajamas in the apartment of a downstairs neighbor. The openness of the situation forced a direct response from her grandmother, who had no choice but to acknowledge the situation and express her feelings against lesbian practice. Jackie's grandmother's negative response made Jackie angry, in part because Jackie had become a pillar of strength in a family mired in

drug addiction, domestic violence, child abandonment, and poverty. Until her untimely death, Jackie's mother had suffered a life of abuse and violence from a husband whom the family continued to embrace. Recall from Chapter 4 that Jackie's sister has a drug addiction, so Jackie had to adopt one of her nephews and has also spent time as a foster mother to two nieces. Nevertheless, her grandmother never relented in her condemnation of Jackie's sexuality, and though they were able to repair their relationship, she never accepted Jackie's lesbian identity.

The initial occurrence of coming out to family was a difficult one for many women. Many described the pain they experienced as they revealed their intention to live an openly gay life to parents and siblings. However, by the time they were interviewed for this research, they were firmly established in their gay identities and were forming their own families. Much of the harsh, unforgiving homophobia of the earlier years had given way to a begrudging tolerance and uneasy, uncertain management of their relationships with kin. Almost all report that over time they have been able to develop stable relationships with parents and siblings. But despite their overall sense that their interacations with relatives are positive, they report a persistent tendency for their mothers, in particular, to continue to express disapproval of or discomfort with their gay sexuality. At the same time, their mothers actively seek to remain involved in their daily activities and lives. Santasha Andrews offers one example. Santasha is a hetero-identified lesbian who did not grow up having same-sex desires. Her first gay relationship occurred well after adulthood and after she had borne two children in a nonmarital heterosexual union. When she told her mother about her new girlfriend, her mother disapproved and told her: "I think it's wrong. A man should be with a woman." Santasha found, however, that "she said this with her mouth and yet still kind of embraced" the relationship: despite her feelings of disapproval, Santasha's mother would regularly invite Santasha and her former partner, Denise, to her home out at the tip of Long Island during the summer.

One year, Santasha and Denise threw a big Mother's Day celebration for both of their moms. Santasha remembers: "My mother came and met her mother. . . . After a while, she was like 'Where's Denise?' She started to embrace her. She was like 'How's Denise doing?' Even though she still, you know, made it clear that she doesn't like it." Santasha's mother's appearance of acceptance and embracement of Denise encouraged Santasha to continue to pursue a close relationship with her mother, but the negative offhand remarks her mother made about Santasha's sexuality re-

sulted in her never being fully comfortable in that relationship. While she appreciates and is even grateful for her mother's interest in continuing their mother-daughter relationship, she knows that when it boils down to it, her mother would rather she not be gay. That unspoken (or sometimes indirectly spoken) homophobia, and the corresponding heterosexist belief that unions between women and men are the better choice, puts a strain on how close she can actually be with her mother.

When Dr. Nilda Flores, a licensed psychotherapist, returned home to South America in 1999 to attend her brother's wedding, her experiences with her family made her realize that although they said they were accepting of her gay sexuality, they were actually very uncomfortable with it. Nilda is from a small country that she says has a history of being "very progressive." Unlike nearby Buenos Aires, where she says gay sexuality is "hidden" and "under cover," in her country people are "out and about." During her trip, Nilda elaborates, "We even saw this man dressed in a tutu in the middle of the street. So it's there [openly gay expressions of sexuality], not like New York, but it's pretty open."

Nilda surmises that her parents, and particularly her mother, were hostile about Nilda's presence at the wedding because of how she portrayed her relationship with her partner, a Black middle-class woman named Adrienne Taylor: "I think what really bothered her was the public aspect of it, that everybody in the family found out." Nilda thought her mom had told her family that she would be bringing her partner to the wedding, so she was taken aback when an aunt approached her during the reception and asked when she would be getting married (to a man). She explained that she is gay and that Adrienne is her partner. Her aunt said she was very surprised, because Nilda's mother had never said anything to anybody about their relationship. After that, Nilda says, while she was in South America, "I wasn't hiding it. I went everywhere with Adrienne. I wasn't putting it in anyone's face, but if they asked me, I introduced her as *mi compañera*. It's an ambiguous term. It's the term they use for gay partnerships. It can also be used as 'my comrade,' but everybody kind of knew, and my mom was freaked out that I was introducing her that way. So I think the public aspect really bothered her."

But even though no one in her family directly told Nilda that her openness about her sexuality was problematic for them, the day after the wedding her mother responded by letting the family dog out of a fenced area to scare Adrienne. They were both afraid for their safety and left Nilda's parents' house to finish their stay in a hotel. For the remainder of the visit, nobody from the family called on or spent time with them save

her father, who called once. After that experience, Nilda says she and Adrienne were traumatized. She felt horrible and particularly disappointed in her brothers and sisters, because in the past she had always been quick to stand up for them in conflicts with their parents, while in this instance no one came to her defense.

Nilda also found her mother's behavior peculiar because years before the wedding, her mother and siblings had visited Nilda in New York, and were well aware of her lesbian sexuality. They had met her friends and a woman (also Black) whom she was dating at the time. During that visit, her family was very nice to her friends and supportive of Nilda. Reflecting back on both experiences, Nilda believes that her mother responded in such a harsh way at the wedding because they were "down where the people she knew could see it, and I think she wanted to keep it under wraps."

In order to avoid this sort of behavior from disappointed family members, some of the women I spoke to decided not to be so direct in outing themselves to family. These people were mostly born right around 1970 or earlier and say they are not in the closet, in the sense that they do not hide their sexuality, but they choose not to name their relationships as gay to family members. Tammy Lindsay, for instance, is a transgressive woman who has never told her mother she is gay; instead, she just starts bringing the person she is dating with her to family functions, and people quickly catch on. She limits her displays of affection at these events in an attempt to be respectful. After all, she was raised in a Holiness-denomination church, which is so conservative that even heterosexual couples who are not married limit their expressions of affection around their elders. Tammy told me: "My mother's a churchgoing woman, so you know, I grew up in the church, in the Holiness church, and you don't need to talk to your mother about some things. Plus, you know at that age and being a church woman and all, they don't want to talk to you about sex and stuff like that. I think you should just bring her [your partner] around the family, you know, to Sunday dinner or family cookouts; she'll know what's up—she's not dumb. Plus, she probably already knows [the nature of the relationship]."

Rather than passing as heterosexual, Tammy's behavior is consistent with Goffman's (1963) and Yoshino's (2006) description of "covering." Covering is an attempt to prevent a stigma from looming large by keeping public expression of the stigma to a minimum. According to Goffman, "The individual's object is to reduce tension, that is, to make it easier for himself and the others to withdraw covert attention from the stigma"

(102). During the three years of my field work, I saw Tammy in two committed relationships, and throughout both of them she remained very involved with her immediate and extended family. One year, for Tammy's birthday, her mom and other relatives joined Tammy at her girlfriend's house for a special dinner. At the party, they played secular music and Tammy danced with her girlfriend in front of her mother.[6] She did not kiss or otherwise show outward affection, however, and neither did any of the guests, most of whom were lesbian.

Shelly Jackson is relatively new to what many gay people call "the life." Before partnering with Shaunte Austin, she was heterosexually married and had four children. When asked how her parents responded when she finally told them she was in the life, she says, "I didn't even tell them. They seen Shaunte with me, and my sister said something to somebody, and that's how it got to my father. But they know that that's my Girl." She takes as confirmation the fact that her father chastised her during a visit when she was speaking in a disrespectful way to Shaunte. He told Shelly, "Don't you talk to her like that. Don't talk to *your Girl* like that." Another time, when her family was invited to spend the night at her father's house, Shelly offered to sleep with her children in one bedroom and have Shaunte sleep in a separate room. Instead, her father told her, "No, you and Shaunte are going to sleep here together, and the boys are going to sleep there."

Shaunte says she downplays her relationship in the presence of those who are uncomfortable in order to show respect. Because Shelly's mother is aware of their relationship but does not want to talk about it, the issue is not ever raised directly. She says, "It's like they think, 'I know it's there, but I just don't want to hear about it.' And that's how some people are." She and Shelly are not affectionate in front of Shelly's mother because, she says, "I don't want anybody to make me feel uncomfortable, so I do the same thing for them. I want everybody to feel comfortable, and I don't see the point of doing something that somebody's not comfortable with."

Whether it be the blatant disregard of close family members, the more subtle offhanded comments of a disapproving mother, the polite distancing and judgment of older relatives, or the passive-aggressive behaviors of family members who are embarrassed by their daughter's obvious sexuality, all are part of the experiences that many Black women who retain connections to their families must negotiate after they have come out as gay. That the women themselves work to smooth over their parents' discomfort by downplaying their sexuality through

indirect language or by limiting their displays of affection attest to the lengths they will go to maintain relations with family members. They compromise by covering or downplaying their status as lesbian. However, my research adds to the understanding of covering by showing agency in these women's decisions of how to de-emphasize their sexuality but not pass as heterosexual. While they act in a limited way around family, they frame this behavior using a narrative of respect rather than a feeling that they do not have the freedom to be gay, and in other ways reveal the importance of significant others in their lives. So while they may choose to downplay their gay identities during social interactions, they nonetheless remain clear in their refusal to give up or deny their gay sexuality. They may not kiss their partners during Thanksgiving dinner, but they will have them sitting right with them at the family table.

OPENLY GAY FAMILIES IN BLACK COMMUNITY LIFE

Anita Adams, introduced earlier, lives with her two children and her partner, Trina Adams, in Harlem, New York, a community that anthropologist John L. Jackson rightfully calls "a symbolic center for African American culture, a key reference point for Blacks who seek to define themselves in relation to a certain canonized version of African American tradition and history." Jackson notes, "People from all over the country (and even the world) link their identities to Harlem and the notable landmarks within it" (2001, 9). Neighborhoods like Harlem in Manhattan and Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn are key reference points for African Americans who define themselves in relation to a particular version of what it means to be Black and to be part of Black cultural, social, political, and economic communities.

Anita's experiences of raising her two children in a community like Harlem have made her reflect on what living an openly gay life has meant for her children, her relationship with her mate, and the neighbors around her as people come to understand the nature of their family life. While she finds that in some Black communities you have to hide the fact that you are gay because "people are not open to the lifestyle," she has learned that in Harlem, "it's become more open." She elaborates: "You're starting to see a lot of gay couples together, so people are starting to come along. But it just takes them some time. They've got to get to know the person. . . . It's like living in a development and you've been there for years. The tenants have got to get to know who this new person is, and [once] they find out this person is a nice person, it's like, 'Come over, have some

tea!' And that's how it's been for us." Pretending to be exasperated, Anita tells me, "[Trina] knows everybody in the neighborhood, people that I don't even frigging know! I'm like, 'Where do you know these people from?' I'm living here all my life and *I* don't even know these people. She made friends."

Anita brings Trina to parent-teacher night at her older daughter's junior high school and to parent planning sessions at her younger daughter's elementary school. She says that even though in a general sense she is not particularly open about her sexuality with strangers, she, Trina, and the children are indeed a family. While as a single mother Anita was a little more reluctant to share with strangers her lesbian identity, as part of a same-sex union she wants Trina to take an active role in creating and developing relationships not just with Anita's kin but also with various outsiders who come into contact with the family, including neighbors, coworkers, and the parents of her children's friends. Anita was happy when Trina initiated a more active role in her daughters' school programs by volunteering for graduation committees and attending parent-themed events, because those activities help them relate to the outside world as a family. She says that the "normal," routine behaviors of her everyday life are allowing the Black community to slowly learn "who we are and how we're living" today.

The presence of openly gay families in Black communities is forcing neighbors, teachers, leaders of community organizations, and various others to acknowledge gay sexuality in a way not seen in previous generations. Many of the families in this study see their presence in Black social environments as their opportunity to show what their lives represent: a fusion of cultural identity and lesbian practice. These families express a sense, however, that most people in their communities have not quite accepted their presence, leaving them with a variety of experiences ranging from unsettlement or uncertainty to rejection and a reluctance to enact a gay sexuality in public spaces.

Marissa Dillard, a corporate attorney, was born and raised in Harlem with her mother and grandmother. Although she and her partner, Josephine Owens, are out to family and friends, she says that living an openly gay life continues to have its challenges: "It's not so easy to be out. I think we still, even now all these years later, being out for over twenty years now, I still think that there's a lot of homophobia out there. So I certainly understand for the sisters who are not out that it's not an easy thing. But I guess it's a part of dealing with our sexuality and trying to educate people in our community by letting them know it

could be any of us that identify as lesbian." As visible lesbians in African American spaces, Marissa, Josephine, and their children are "new pioneers" in the struggle for gay awareness, acceptance, and equality. In her comment, Marissa refers to Black lesbians who are not out as "sisters," implying that she sees herself as part of a group of others who have a similar goal in choosing to remain in predominantly Black neighborhoods while living openly as lesbians. She also sees herself as an educator to heterosexual Blacks whom she thinks know little about the actual lives of lesbian and gay people. She believes she has a responsibility to increase the visibility of gay people in the communities where she lives and has lived. So for women like Marissa, being openly gay is not just about fulfilling same-sex desire: it also involves teaching and increasing awareness among Black people of what Black homosexuality can mean.

As discussed in Chapter 4, couples with children have to operate in various settings—school recitals, parent-teacher meetings, extracurricular sports—that directly or indirectly call for them to name their relationships to others. In these situations, the racial environment and the openness of the institutional setting affect the level of comfort Black lesbians feel about revealing a gay sexuality. Because of the Black community's collective discomfort around sexuality, Black gays and lesbians have not gained enough political and social traction to be able to create as many gay-friendly spaces *within* Black environments relative to the spaces gay Whites in urban areas occupy. Rather, Black gays and lesbians are largely subject to the cultural norms of their communities. Anita says she has felt more comfortable engaging with officials at her younger daughter Kacey's school because it is in Greenwich Village, where she estimates that 95 percent of the administrators and parents are White and there are other children with two moms or two dads. This predominantly White, gay-friendly environment is new to her and is something she clearly likes. She says: "It's interesting. I mean it's just so cool. I think there's more peace. When you see a closed type of school there's a lot of pressure, but when you go to a school where everyone's open about whatever, it's so different. I went to a potluck at Kacey's school a couple of Sundays ago, and some of the parents were gay. It was men and women [who were gay], and it was just so interesting. And it was peaceful! You didn't have to be ashamed—not ashamed, just hiding. It was just so interesting."

Anita's older daughter, Kiyana, on the other hand, attends a "closed type of school" that is less inviting for Anita and Trina as openly gay parents. When Trina has tried to interact with teachers and administrators

as a parent to Kiyana, she has been met with discomfort and resistance. During a parent-teacher conference, for example, awkward silences followed her and Anita's explanation of how Trina fit into the family. They were determined not to take the easy way out by saying Trina was Kiyana's aunt or godmother. They have faced other uncomfortable moments at the school, but Anita likens the resistance they encounter to the fact that Black people are still "coming along and learning what the lifestyle is all about." Nevertheless, there was a noticeable difference in Anita's tone when she talked about the greater comfort she has experienced at Kacey's school in Greenwich Village. She moved from a "buck up and tough it out" way of talking about how to survive as gay parents at Kiyana's predominantly Black school to a wistfulness over being able to let down her guard in the predominantly White, overtly gay-friendly setting. She mused that she was glad that at the school in Greenwich Village, she and Trina "didn't have to be ashamed." She immediately corrected herself by saying, "not ashamed, just hiding." But the slip of her tongue spoke volumes: Anita's comments, and the comments of others suggest that for Black lesbians, interacting in Black communities invites a struggle to avoid portraying to others—and perceiving within themselves—that their sexuality is something for which they should be ashamed or sorry.

In other contexts, the concern is not about rejection or feelings of shame but about how to negotiate relationships with outsiders who seem to accept these women's gay sexuality but who suggest through their interactions that they are reluctant to acknowledge the nature of these unions out loud. Trina says: "At my office, it is a known fact that I am a lesbian, it is a known fact that Anita is my spouse, but it's just never talked about. When she comes to the office, it is like all smiles, and they genuinely love her. When she comes into my office, everyone is trying to grab her into their office. So it is like, 'We know, but we don't want to talk about it. We love you guys, but we don't want to talk about it.' " Other people report similar experiences. Neighbors will behave in a friendly way to a gay couple but become uncomfortable when they have to use language that acknowledges the relationship the individuals have to one another. They will refer to a woman's partner as "the young lady who lives with you" or "your friend." Coworkers will ask how a partner is doing by referring to the partner by name rather than using a label of "girlfriend" or "partner."

Many of the lesbians in my study say they are not closeted in Black communities. They wear engagement- or wedding-type rings to signal

their commitment (even when they have not married and have not registered for a domestic partnership) and will let heterosexual people know they are engaged to or partnered with a woman. They dress with gender complementarity when going out with their mates, which particularly makes lesbian couples visible to one another and to the public.[7] Biological mothers list their partner as their child's guardian on school forms. While these behaviors let others know they are part of a couple, they remain careful in how they directly represent themselves to outsiders because they say they are never certain how people will respond to their relationship, and are cautious about avoiding the potential for homophobic violence. They tend not to post rainbow flags or other symbols of gay/lesbian identity on their cars or clothing, and at events like a funeral service or church function they will introduce a partner by name instead of using a title like "lover," "girlfriend," or "wife."[8] They tend to be indirect when acknowledging the nature of their relationship to those with whom they do not interact on a daily basis.

Nilda Flores says people in the Latino community of Washington Heights, where she works and lives, tolerate her gay sexuality as long as she looks and behaves like "an acceptable gay person" and as long as she does not try to equate it with heterosexual marriage. She finds that their definition of an "acceptable gay person" is someone who does not show public affection or impose their sexuality on others. She concludes, "They want us to be a little apologetic, like 'Oh, let me not offend you.' They want you to treat their [heterosexual] relationship as more important or more legitimate. That's the sense I get."

For some women, it is less important that family or the larger community agree with their choices or support them as gay people than that they tolerate them and allow them to live their lives without overt conflict. Venus Giles, an army veteran born in 1965, said: "I just want to live in an environment where people don't necessarily have to agree, but they accept it and move on. Don't be concerned about what we doing. It ain't your business! I ain't worried about what you doing. I don't care what you doing, you know? So I just would like for it to be someday, somewhere, where we can go and we can just live in harmony and just live our lives and just be who we gonna be, whatever that might be." Venus concluded that one of the costs of being gay is giving up the open expression of her self, saying, "I have given up the freedom to be able to express myself affectionately in the street, you know, to be able to announce my love like everybody else has the right to do. So you give up some things." She did not follow this statement with a wish that she

could change the way people think or the environment to make it more tolerant. Instead, she said: "You give and take, you know? But hey, it's part of the way you have to live these days." To her, this is the cost of being gay, and she has decided to take on that cost as the price of her own self-fulfillment.

The Ambiguity of "Tolerant" Attitudes and Patterns of Integrative Marginalization

The November 2008 national election had on the ballot a Black candidate who was a serious contender for the office of President of the United States. That year, African Americans across the country paid particular attention to national politics, including a measure on the California ballot to repeal the rights of same-sex couples in that state to marry. The measure passed and sparked public interest because of the large percentages of racial minorities and Blacks in particular who supported the measure. I happened to be in New York that November to follow up on some of the families in this study and to initiate some new research. I spoke with a group of older Black lesbians and gay men, and the topic of the Black community and same-sex marriage legislation was on many of their minds. They agreed that there is widespread ideological disapproval among Blacks of the open practice of homosexuality, and hypothesized myriad reasons why this is the case.[9] Jackie Roberts told me: "I think Black people overall have a problem with sexuality as a whole, so when you start breaking it down in different categories, it just becomes more pronounced. . . . What we do is that we internalize those things that we feel or we think will make them [Whites] more accepting of us."

Cohen (1999) lays out a theoretical framework for understanding how gay and lesbian people experience life in Black communities. She argues that "integrative strategies provide control by unequivocally regulating the *majority* of marginal community members while allowing *a chosen few* to have limited access to dominant institutions and resources" (58, emphasis in original). A limited number of individuals within marginal communities have special resources or relationships with dominant group members that give them access to a privileged status in the larger society. Cohen says they hold a unique position both inside and outside of the community, and they are expected to live out a "double status" of allegiance and group membership. In my own work, I find that middle-class lesbians are most likely to experience the integrative

marginalization Cohen describes. Their income, education, and occupational status compensates for the negative status their gay identity imposes. Katrice Webster works for one of the top three corporate law firms in New York, Dr. Renee Martin is the head resident in emergency room medicine at a large metropolitan hospital, Ro Gaul is a licensed electrician, and Angie Russell is one of only a handful of female African American sergeants in the New York City Police Department. People in the racial community admire and respect these women because of their professional accomplishments. Their parents brag about their occupational achievements, and this acceptance partially makes up for the disapproval of their openly gay sexuality. Twenty-nine percent of the women in this study completed their education with a four-year college degree, and an additional 33 percent have advanced degrees. Among the 38 percent who did not complete college, all but four have some education beyond high school, usually technical training or mastery of a trade. Forty-seven percent report an annual individual income greater than $50,000 (in 2004 dollars). Their education, income, and occupational status, when taken together, bestow on them a measure of self-determination and authority over their own lives.

Middle- and upper-middle-class lesbians also select into the more socially organized, economically stable and safer Black and Latino communities, which lessens the threat of being a victim of crime more generally, and of hate crimes in particular. Couples like Katrice and Caroline or Marissa and Josephine live in sections of Harlem and Brooklyn that have more services and resources, a greater presence of working people, and that are currently undergoing or have recently undergone gentrification by middle-class Blacks, Whites, and other racial groups. In contrast, working-class women like Corey, Jackie, and Venus live in parts of Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx where revitalization is slow and where there is more disadvantage and higher crime rates. There is a more cautious atmosphere in these neighborhoods. Strangers in these contexts may be more menacing, and safety in these communities is a sobering concern—not just around sexuality but around any visible identity that targets one as an easy mark. In less stable neighborhoods the greater concerns over physical safety make it difficult for lesbians who do not conform to traditional expectations of femininity to live open lives.

According to Cohen, integrative marginalization also "alters dominant ideological practices previously used to justify the total exclusion of marginal group members in order to account for the limited integration of some oppressed group members. . . . The adjustments made in

the ideological explanations of exclusion stress the ability of certain oppressed group members to take on dominant group characteristics and values. The success of their assimilation is rationalized as being facilitated by biological, social, or material characteristics differentiating them from the majority of marginal group members" (1999, 59–60). Integrative marginalization, in other words, allows lesbians with high-status occupations and high incomes who practice gender conformity or who assimilate in other ways to suffer less social distance. Sometimes, they are given special status among heterosexuals. While social class affords them an advantaged position inside and outside the lesbian community, the racial community, and larger society, they may still be understood as inferior because of one or more of their marginalized statuses (race, gender, and/or sexuality).

Having a pleasing appearance can similarly mitigate against the larger racial community's disapproving attitudes toward homosexuality. An attractive style may encourage the larger racial group to overlook its negative perception of homosexuality in this specific case, and excuse homosexual behavior or reinterpret it in ways that allow the individuals to participate undisturbed in the larger life of the community. Karen Jabar, a forty-two-year-old law enforcement officer, for example, says she notices that when a woman has a "so-called butch image or dyke image" or "clothing like a guy," being gay "seems to be something that people sneer up about. But when you happen to be cute, or . . . when your speech can be viewed as being a bit more intelligent and not that ghetto slang," being gay "seems to be a little more tolerated." She describes her unease on the one or two occasions when she has gone out with women who "are dressed like boys: I don't feel comfortable. I just don't feel comfortable because it's like all eyes are on us. We're the focus of attention on the subway or something. But I've noticed when I go out with a very feminine woman, or a woman like myself, it's just viewed as a cute thing." She does not believe people are viewing herself and the feminine woman as straight. Instead, she comments, "they think perhaps that there's something going on, but it's cute."

Jackie says the inherent traits she has (fair skin and soft hair texture from her father's Portuguese heritage; a slight yet athletic physique maintained with regular visits to the gym) are valued by others and protect her from the harassment that often accompanies women with a nonfeminine gender presentation. She proudly tells me that her gender presentation is specifically "not urban ghetto": she does not like to wear jerseys, fitted caps, baggy jeans, or sneakers. Instead, she wears men's dress boots, slim jeans, and men's button-down shirts. Her clothes are neither feminine

nor representative of a traditionally urban masculine style typically associated with today's young Black males. Both women and men find her appealing, and this limits the negative comments in the neighborhoods she frequents.

Overall, the more positive responses that economically successful lesbians and lesbian women who are perceived as attractive receive suggest a bifurcation in how gay identities are accepted in families and in communities, with greater acceptance for women who are able and willing to conform in other ways that uphold a positive, respectable image of Black people. This partial acceptance of a select few sexual minorities by the Black community as a whole according to their possession of valued traits that promote Black respectability is consistent with Cohen's concept of integrative marginalization. The exceptions described above exemplify the ways in which Black gay people negotiate a sexuality that is based in racial group membership. Heterosexuals are most likely to include gays and lesbians as part of the racial group when gays and lesbians remain connected to their racialized communities by living in Black neighborhoods and contributing to racial group uplift.[10] The larger community is also most accepting when an individual's expression of gay identity is consistent with the dominant expressions of Black culture in terms of music, dress, hair, residence, racial political ideologies, and so forth.[11] Black gays want to show to heterosexuals that their racial identity remains important to their sense of self (Moore 2010a; 2010b).

For lesbians who interact in predominantly Black social networks, this is not a problem. In my study, their primary relationships are with other Blacks—even their gay social groups are predominantly Black or Black and Latino. There are times, however, when they feel forced to choose between identities based in race and sexuality or when an alignment with race comes at a cost to one of their other identities. Certain issues, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage or the repeal of the ban against openly gay soldiers serving in the military, may call for them to demonstrate allegiances based in sexuality. Commitment to these issues offers the potential for racial distancing, particularly when race leaders argue that there are more pressing issues like poverty and employment that Blacks should rally around.

Even though the open expression of homosexuality is a cross-cutting issue in Black communities, other characteristics of the newly visible Black lesbian and gay population make their homosexuality more palatable to the racial group. They are openly gay and remain involved in their

families of origin, hosting barbecues and fish fries that make other gay people of color visible in the community. They are walking their dogs together, going into car dealerships to purchase cars, opening joint bank accounts, and in various ways interweaving themselves into the social fabric of Black community life with multiple identity statuses that are observable to the rest of society. The strong racialized contexts of lesbian and gay life in New York allow for gay and lesbian issues to be seen as issues that are important for Black people.

BLACK RELIGION AS SIMULTANEOUS SOURCE OF CONDEMNATION AND STRENGTH

Most of the women I spoke with have a history of membership and belonging in Black religious communities. In many cases, their choice to openly express their lesbian sexuality threatened to put them on the outside of religious and sometimes racial group membership. In African American communities, religious structures provide direction for the language, rituals, and behaviors individuals incorporate in their lives. People participate in churches and mosques not just for spiritual guidance but also to find a sense of community, and they use the teachings of these religious groups as a set of practices or blueprints by which to organize their lives, however loosely or stringently. Many Black religious institutions participate in public rule enforcement and policing of parishioners' lives, and they openly condemn behaviors deemed to fall outside of religious teachings. Ministers, elders, even church mothers have the authority to approach individual congregants whom they suspect of violating the rules of the church (i.e., wearing clothes that are inappropriate, engaging in nonmarital sex) to confront or sanction them. Leaders frame this disciplinary action around their interest in saving souls or helping people (usually young people) resist temptation.

According to Reverend Horace Griffin, a former Baptist minister, there are few arenas where the dread and condemnation of homosexuality is more noticeable than in Black church settings (2006, chapter 1). Because of the involvement of the church across so many different community institutions and social groups, many researchers suggest that in Black communities, the philosophies and beliefs of religious organizations significantly impact the philosophies and views residents have on other issues, including homosexuality. Herek and Capitanio (1995) have found that religiosity, measured through organizational religious involvement (i.e., church attendance) and a conservative religious orientation, is

associated with negative attitudes toward lesbians and gays and lack of support for civil rights for homosexuals. And those who have internalized religious teachings, particularly conservative teachings, are more likely to practice heterosexism (VanderStoep and Green 1988).

The move from private to public expressions of gay sexuality have highlighted a contradiction between Black churches' use of religion to constrain gay behavior and the use of religion and spirituality by many gay people to support and validate their gay identities. Lesbians who express a personal or ideological conflict between their sexuality and their religious beliefs tend to have been raised in conservative faiths where negative attitudes toward the enactment of sexual desire more generally, and of same-sex desire in particular, produce feelings of guilt and shame. Both the disapproval of homosexuality as a sin and the cultural leadership that religious organizations have historically had in Black communities make many—even those who are not particularly religious—wonder within themselves if their behavior is wrong.

Nyla Ransom is a very "out" lesbian. She and her partner have conceived three children together during their ten-year relationship. She references her mate in conversations at work and at the children's school, and when people are unclear about what she means by "partner," she tells them she is in a gay relationship. Yet when she is around religious people, it causes her to retreat into invisibility with regard to her family life. She has tried different churches but has never felt satisfied with organized religion. She says: "I get very uncomfortable around people who are religious. I haven't had conversations with them, but I think that they think it's [homosexuality is] something wrong. That's the group that I really just get very uncomfortable [around], and I don't really, like, stand up and say, 'I'm gay' kind of thing. I notice that about myself: there is something about religion that just, I don't know, maybe I feel like maybe it's wrong, but I haven't delved into religion again because it kind of turns me off." When she gets into a conversation about how religion ties into her gay identity, Nyla is filled with questions and uncertainties that she has not been able to resolve within herself. As a consequence, she says she "steers clear" of religion.

Althea Payne says being born in Jamaica, West Indies, and raised in the Pentecostal faith has caused her to struggle with how to maintain a connection to religious institutions as a gay woman. She says:

> I've had to do a lot of soul-searching with that, because the church that my family goes to, I have also been going to for thirty years, so I don't know anything else. But over the years, I've felt myself just kind of pulling away,

> because their teachings are totally against my lifestyle, so it's very difficult for me to sit in the congregation and be comfortable and feel like I'm being blessed or any of those things. I've had to kind of just find my own spirituality away from the church, even if [that means] just on a Sunday, listening to some gospel [music] and reading my Bible and praying, because I felt that I just couldn't commune with Him in church. So I go [to church] once in a while on special occasions—Easter, Christmas, and in between—but for the most part I just do that communing with Him on a one-on-one.

Althea says she kept asking herself, "Why do the people that I worship with seem to preach that God doesn't love me because of my sexuality? . . . I do believe that God loves me, and even though they may not agree with what I am, I think that this is between me and God, and they are pretty much out of their mind to try to teach me that I'm not loveable." Notice that she does not say that God is accepting of her sexuality, only that her sexuality is not going to prevent God from loving her.

I convened a focus group to discuss how religion fit into the lives of Black lesbians. Yolanda Carmichael was in that group, and shared that she grew up in the Baptist church where she was taught that "homosexuality, same-sex gender relationships were wrong." Today, she maintains many of the spiritual beliefs she was raised with, but is ambivalent about whether the community in which she was brought up is accepting of homosexuality. She says that Blacks "as a people are very religious people," and this has consequences for how they respond to same-sex relationships: "You know, people go back to the Bible, and they take what they want from the Bible, and they add what they want to the Bible. But because we are who we are in terms of our religion and our spirituality, that [pause] I don't know, I see it both ways. I see that people are accepting because no matter what, we are children of God, and those without sin—if this is considered sin—cast the first stone. But on the flip side of that, I see for the most part people saying, 'Do what you want to do.' "

Yolanda does not completely disagree with the desire of the community that gay people be less visible, because she sees their disapproval as rooted in Black Christianity, "our religion and our spirituality." She says people are accepting because we are all God's children, regardless of our sin, adding the caveat "if this is considered sin"—meaning if being gay or living a gay life is a sin. She seems uncertain whether lesbian practice is a sin, and she does not come down firmly on either side. We can see a cloud of uncertainty over her thinking about whether she is participating in a life that is sinful. When asked whether she felt any condemnation or guilt about being gay, given her Baptist faith, she

paused and said that guilt and condemnation "were projected" onto her by family and the church. In response, she "went through a lot of spiritual stuff" because it mattered to her what her family thought, and it "really, *really* mattered what God thought." She asked God for help in dealing with her feelings of attraction to a particular woman. When I asked her, "What did God say?" she laughed and replied, "Well, I'm still a lesbian today, and I'm a happy lesbian today!" She says that after all of her talks with God, the bottom line is that "I'm His child, regardless." Her comments do not suggest a complete feeling of acceptance from God or a complete resolution that her life fits with her spirituality, but rather that she has come to a place where she can be happy in her sexuality without renouncing her religious faith.

Saidiya Muhammad came to a similar place of compromise after struggling to find a place for her same-sex desire within Islam:

> I just threw caution to the wind and did what I had to do. In the beginning it was hard because I felt like a hypocrite, you know, praying, socializing, pretending that I'm straight. And then finally I spoke to the Imam. I said, "I need a break you know, I desire women now." He's like "What?!" I said I just need to be by myself to see if I could cope with the whole issue with Islam and Allah and my sexuality. He said, "Just keep it to yourself." So . . . I stayed away from [religious] activities. I just wanted to build [a romantic] relationship with this person without pressures. . . . I had just broken down—no praying, no fasting. Nothing. I went out naked. When I say naked, I mean I showed my arms, shorter skirts, going to the club, you know, just doing the wild and crazy carefree stuff! I had to do it, because this was something that I hadn't done in years. . . . And after some time, I realized I could do this—I could incorporate both of them in my life and have my fun, in a way. And after six years, I am stronger than ever [in my faith], and I'm still with my desires.

Yolanda and Saidiya both struggled to reconcile their feelings about their different religious commitments, and both managed to find peace in their relationships with God without abandoning an identity as openly gay women.

Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin

Gay people have always participated in the church. Althea told me, "When I went to my dad's church, there were always gays in the choir. [About] the choirmaster, my dad used to say 'Oh, we have a fairy,' but he was always embraced. I've never heard anyone say anything other than, 'Oh, he was a fairy.' " Leading an openly gay life, however, forces

the individual and the church to confront homosexuality more directly and invites a "Love the sinner, hate the sin" approach to dealing with gay people. Dr. Frank M. Reid III, senior pastor of Bethel AME Church in Baltimore, offered the following commentary on homosexuality and the church: "The Black church does not have a history of gay-bashing and homophobia. Even those churches that hold to the conservative approach on sexual issues have loved the homosexual while disliking the practice of homosexuality. While our pews hold people who have committed adultery and fornication, and may have had children outside of marriage, the Black church at its best has managed to love this sinner without loving the sin" (Reid 1991).

The frameworks of "love the sinner, hate the sin" or "don't ask, don't tell" imply that gay people can and should occupy a lesser status in the community. Bishop Carl Bean, an openly gay minister and head of the Unity Fellowship Church of Christ, says that the love the sinner but not the sin approach to dealing with homosexuality in Black churches relegates lesbians and gays to a lower social class and translates into "We love you, but not who you really are" (Brown 1994). When gay sexuality is closeted, everyone can know about it and rationalize it merely as a bad behavior that a fellow congregant may need forgiveness for, just as one might need forgiveness for adultery or theft. But to be openly gay means that one is asking for that behavior to be condoned. It forces a confrontation of the assumption that homosexuality is morally wrong.

There are lesbians who feel they gain a spiritual connection to God in churches that are publicly and vocally gay-friendly, even when the church does not preach the exact same doctrine as the one they were raised in. Ellasteen Johnson left the church when she was twenty years old because she felt there was no place for her there as a gay woman. She returned almost fifty years later, after the death of her lesbian partner of thirty years, to a church that is considerably more liberal than the Apostolic faith she grew up in because being in the church gave her "a sense of being an authentic person." Ellasteen joined this new church despite its having a different doctrine than the one she was raised with because, she said, she wanted to worship in a place where she could "feel a sense of myself as a spiritual person connected to a higher order of belief." Although the satisfaction she now experiences in church is "nothing like when I was a child," she stays because of a need to have this connection for her "spiritual self." Ellasteen attends Riverside Church[12] and says she and other gay parishioners have made it a priority to connect with each other and to have a visible presence. She chose Riverside as a place of

worship because of its active support and embracing of lesbian and gay people. She calls her church "very gay-friendly" and says that the church has an LGBTQ ministry for homeless sexual minority youths.

Many who grew up in strict religious sects are wary of churches that are very open in their acceptance of homosexuals or that have outwardly gay leadership, however, because these places of worship often deviate in substantive ways from the more conservative religious ideologies they were raised with. Many also perceive these churches to overemphasize and call attention to homosexuality. Those from more conservative denominations often say they are unwilling to completely depart from the traditions they were taught to believe. While they will allow for modifications of church "rules" about the type of clothing they can wear or adornments of jewelry and make-up that may be frowned upon, to renounce the tenets of the faith—baptism rituals, rules that allow successful entry into heaven—can feel sacrilegious.

Ruthie Erickson has a mother and older brother who are saved and attend church services several times a week. Even though Ruthie was not raised with any particular religious beliefs, her brother will often "go head-to-head" with her about "living her life right" for herself and her three-year-old son Lawrence by going to church. She says she doesn't listen to him "at all," but she does send Lawrence over to her mother's house to attend church from time to time. Last year, Ruthie decided that she wanted her son to have the experience of belonging to a church, and she visited several different congregations trying to find one where she felt comfortable. So even though she says her mother's churchgoing behaviors and her brother's arguments about the importance of going to church have no effect on her, she has made efforts to introduce more formal religion into her own and her son's lives.

A friend introduced Ruthie to a church created by and for openly gay Christians, but Ruthie did not like it because "it was all about [being] gay." She says the church was too focused on being gay, and the behaviors of the parishioners made her feel like she "was going to the club" because the members seemed less interested in the Word of God and more interested in meeting other gay people. Ruthie is interested in finding a church where gay people can feel comfortable worshipping but that is also focused on "the Bible" and the "teachings of Christ." She says of some gay-oriented churches, "They, you can't change the whole Word, the Bible and everything to suit you. It is written one way to be conceived in that way and you can't just change it because you're gay and make it all about gays. It's not. But at the same token, you can't

be throwing stones at them and all that, either. So it should be open and you should feel comfortable, [but] I haven't found that comfort yet." In contrast to Ellasteen, Ruthie and others believe it important that a church retain the conservative doctrine and teachings that are the foundation of its spiritual beliefs. They want a church that is accepting of gay people but that still retains the principal doctrine of that faith.

Church Membership as Representation of Racial Group Consciousness

Because religious organizations are the moral, social, and political authority in Black communities, some of the women I interviewed keep trying to find a way to participate in them despite their feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty toward much of Black religion. This helps to explain why Van Green, who knew she felt a strong attraction to women and a very weak attraction to men during all of her teenage years, married a man at age eighteen, only to divorce him and return exclusively to women six months later. She says her marriage was part of an effort to fulfill the wishes of society, her family, and her religious faith.

Adrienne Witherspoon says even though she did not attend church regularly while growing up, "It was a very big part of my life culturally because my family and my extended family was in it, and my parents talked to me about the Bible all the time, and so it really did impact my psyche even though I wasn't physically going to church every Sunday. But I had a lot of conflict from very young about God and what that meant, because I did have a very independent personality and it didn't seem like it was congruent to a lot of the values that my parents were espousing and things that they wanted me to do. So it was always a huge struggle for me." Adrienne's current concerns do not lie in her family's acceptance or condemnation; her mother is deceased, and she does not worry about what the rest of her family thinks. She was estranged from her family prior to coming out as gay, and this did not change once her family members became aware of her sexuality. Instead, her concerns lie in how to retain connections to the Black community and how to develop a spirituality that can strengthen her and contribute to her personal growth. For the past year, Adrienne has been attending Riverside Church, the same church as Ellasteen. At Riverside, she has found a group of people among whom she can be herself, and this has helped her retain a connection to the Black community. Past homophobic experiences with community leaders combined with her emotional

distance from family members and involvement in an interethnic relationship with a woman from South America could in combination create distance between herself and Black people. She uses her involvement in the church to mediate this potential distance. In sum, Black religious organizations hold the potential to bind Blacks together as a cultural group, despite differences across class or other constructed categories.

Strategies of Resistance and Accommodation

How do gay people negotiate the limitations religion imposes? Most people go through a period in which they try to acquiesce to the church's expectations and their family's hopes that they live their lives as heterosexual. Even those who say they have always been drawn to women or who have had same-sex desire from a very young age usually try heterosexuality through relationships, marriage, and/or childbearing. Those committed to practicing a gay sexuality who still desire a connection to religious institutions seek out organizations that are either tolerant of or silent on the issue of homosexuality. Davina Brown characterizes the Black community as "traditional," "conservative," "homophobic," and "not very accepting" of lesbian and gay people. She also identifies as Baptist and attends what she defines as a "traditional Black" church in Brooklyn. She says that its leaders and congregation rarely mention homosexuality, however, and when they do, it is not discussed in a negative way. She is happy about that, because she would not feel comfortable worshipping in a church where the pastor was "denigrating homosexuals or saying negative things." She has identified "quite a few" other gays and lesbians in the congregation, and she often attends services with her Trinidadian partner, Rochelle. Nevertheless, they do not identify themselves as partners to the other parishioners, and she is not "out" at church. Thus any perceived judgments or homophobia that might exist in the ideology of religious institutions toward homosexuality can be mediated when those values are not openly or publicly stated, but rather are left as an understood or uncertain position of the church.

The process of searching for God can lead to self-acceptance of a gay sexuality, even when individuals reach no firm conclusion of support or acceptance from a religious institution. Marisol Sampson has gone through a process of searching for a church, and in the process, she says, "I really kind of found myself, where I fit, regardless of the church."

While she would like to find a church that uplifts all of who she is, she's no longer actively searching for it:

> I've found my relationship with God, and I'm really happy, and it's [the search has] kind of made me much stronger. Now I'm not concerned at all about what anybody thinks. I'm just kind of like, "This is me and so be it," and sometimes people are like, "Well, you know this church believes this, and you know Catholics believe that and this and that," and I'm just like, "That's what *they* believe, but I know that God wants me to be happy, and He wants me to do the right thing, and He wants me to live my life properly, and that's what I'm concerned with, not your version of what it is that I should or should not be doing." So I can sit in church and enjoy, you know, the whole kind of, like, the energy of what's going on and the spirituality without really kind of getting up in the minutiae of what everybody else is saying about what I should and should not do.

CONCLUSION

When their public enactment of homosexuality threatens to separate them from strong and positive affiliations with their racial group, Black gay women must negotiate and manage their group affiliate and insider status based on race. Several strategies that these women use for dealing with disapproving attitudes and religious condemnation have been discussed in this chapter.[13] The majority of the women in this study remain in predominantly Black neighborhoods and social contexts and negotiate regularly with family and community. Those who remain, particularly those with the resources to leave if they choose, say the support of and membership in the larger Black community is important to them. They remain because they trust in racial solidarity and racial group membership. They also remain because they have less confidence that they will ever be fully accepted as members of other identity groups, such as those based in sexuality.

In the past decade, Black gay people have been increasingly willing to test that trust by making their gay identities more public and asserting their interest in being involved and taking on leadership roles in the Black community. The move from gay sexuality as a primarily private enactment to the open expression of it and insistence on acknowledgment of it from family, community residents, and even church parishioners comes at a price: openly gay people often have to give up full acceptance from family and friends. But this is a price Black lesbians who remain in African American communities are willing to pay in order to maintain

a racial group affiliation. In Pattillo's (2007) study of class tensions within the rapidly gentrifying Chicago neighborhood of North Kenwood, she identifies the various disputes between Black residents as the working- and middle-class struggle for ownership of the community. She shows that these ongoing debates are part of the contestations of what it means to be Black, and she concludes that participation in the Black community requires the periodic engagement in debate and the negotiation and reconciliation that follow. Those committed to the group choose "participation over abdication and involvement over withdrawal, even and especially when the disagreements get heated and sometimes vicious" (5).

Patillo's argument suggests that the women I have studied remain involved in Black community life despite the conflicts over acceptance of their sexuality because those conflicts are part and parcel of their sense of community and belonging. The struggle over power and having one's voice heard are all part of the social organization of Black communities. Group membership is not about sameness or having one voice, but about having a commonality, a perceived link that connects its members regardless of other differences that might also exist. This chapter offers insight into how Black lesbians embark on the maintenance of group affiliation and insider status around one identity based on race when cross-cutting issues around the public enactment of homosexuality threaten to separate them from strong and positive affiliations with the racial group.